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It gives me great pleasure to bid a warm 'Selamat Datang' to the foreign delegates. I hope you will benefit much from this workshop. This workshop here today reflects the seriousness on our part to step up efforts to enhance the status of rural women, generally, and that of women in the micro enterprise sector, in particular.

2. You would recall that on 25th February last year some 120 countries around the world, represented by 64 First Ladies and Wives of heads of states, numerous heads of international agencies and financial institutions gathered together in Geneva to endorse the Geneva Declaration in support of the Economic Advancement of Rural Women. The plight of the rural women, particularly the 550 million poor rural women of the world, was put on world agenda. The Geneva Summit for the rural women called the attention of the world to the deteriorating conditions of the rural women and their households. It also stressed that in order to alleviate rural poverty, we must recognise and acknowledge the pivotal role of rural women, who are generally the food producers, processors and managers, as well as earners whose incomes are critical to their household.

3. Since the Geneva Summit, an International Steering Committee on the Follow-up activities of the Geneva Declaration was established. Today's workshop is part of the initiative to implement programmes that could mutually benefit countries in this region. It is hoped that a forum such as this can help facilitate the exchange of information, expertise and experiences in our quest to help rural women overcome their problem of poverty.

4. Asia and the Pacific region is a vast continent of great diversity in terms of religion, culture, socio-political systems, resource endowment and patterns of economic growth. While generalisations concerning women's roles and situations are rarely valid, some characteristics of women's position are common across a number of countries in Asia and the Pacific islands. For one, Women's status is often low in the face of strong cultural prejudices and ideologies. In general, we find that societies, modern or traditional, western or oriental, tend to overlook or minimise the economic contribution of women.

5. Asia, the world's most populous continent, is estimated to have over half a billion people living in poverty. In every Asian country, women comprise a large proportion of the poor, and the majority of the very poor. In fact, Asia accounts for 65 percent of the world's poor rural women.

Among these, the most disadvantaged are the female heads of households, who account for one fourth to one third of rural households in the region. These female heads of households usually have to assume the economic responsibility for the survival of their households, because for a majority of them, their husbands and sons have migrated to the cities.

6. We know that rural women are frequently associated with landlessness, low agricultural productivity, and saturation of employment opportunities in the rural areas. They also usually lack skills, and are inaccessible to productive resources. It is in this context and against this background that micro enterprises are thought to provide the best alternative to ensure the economic empowerment of rural women.

7. It is also on this premise that this workshop is being organised. It is hoped that following this regional workshop, countries involved will be able to draw up their own national plans of action on rural women, focusing on micro enterprise development in Asia and Pacific Islands.

We must make concerted efforts to incorporate rural women in development policies, strategies and programmes in order to revitalise the rural sector. In addition, development funds must be allocated to produce appropriate technologies, or to modernise existing primitive and low-level production

technologies generally found in the rural areas. Women, making up an important source of rural human resources, need training and upgrading of skills that would enable them to be productive, self-reliant and enterprising individuals or groups.

8. Micro-enterprises offer great potentials for women and their families to move out of poverty. Micro-enterprises can become successful as a programme to enhance rural women's income provided some or all of the following conditions are met:-

- If production can be increased and distributed over wide market.

- If simple appropriate technologies are introduced.
- If new or improved skills are developed.
- If credit is made readily accessible.
- If training of product development and new designs are given.
- If marketing infrastructures are provided and ensured.
- If networking facilities are developed.

9. Micro enterprises generally involve very tiny scale of production, using very small capital and energy intensive, due to its low level of technology. To truly empower the rural women, it is therefore vital that we mobilise resources so that rural women can access to, decide and control the use of resources. In this age of technology, micro enterprises should be given the necessary policy backing, technical and monetary support to ensure efficient production and management, increased productivity, and sustainability of the projects. There should be a scaling up of technology, from appropriate to intermediate level so that rural women do not remain static with low technology and low productivity. The private sector can also play its role to mobilise research and development efforts. They could develop and manufacture labour-saving machinery and other forms of technology for use by women in micro enterprise production.

10. Disadvantaged groups, especially the rural women, have to face not only external barriers, but also the psychological barriers within themselves, in their struggle to improve their lives. The deeply ingrained psyche of female subordination, subservience and other gender biasness need to be removed especially when they hinder women's efforts to access and control productive resources.

Sometimes it is necessary to provide these women confidence-building, assertiveness training, and communication and negotiating skills, in addition to technical and business management training, in order for them to be more successful in their micro-enterprises.

11. It is also true that the rural population is not a homogeneous group. Income differential is observed among the rural households between countries as well as within a country. In Malaysia, the percentage of the poor in the rural areas is 17 percent. In our zest to help the very poor in the rural areas, let us not overlook the struggles of the low income rural households, who largely comprise the small-holder farmers and their households. This non-poor category of families may have moved up just above the poverty line but the household members are still struggling for a decent life.

12. In Malaysia, a majority of micro-enterprise producers are women from such socio-economic group. These women are industrious, innovative, resourceful but again encounter similar problems and barriers that prevail in the micro-enterprise sector. Research has shown that a number of enterprising individuals who seek information, technical assistance, credit and financing, and market network do so on their own initiatives. Such enterprising individuals and groups should be given professional guidance, incentives and support to expand their business ventures.

Micro-enterprises are too tiny to reap the benefits of economies of scale.

13. Having recognised that micro enterprises can be a potential catalyst for economic empowerment of women, I hope this seminar will be successful in coming up with an Action Plan that is wholistic and integrated so that ultimately we will be able to establish, promote, upgrade, expand, and sustain micro enterprises and entrepreneurial programmes.

Towards this end, there must be close cooperation between professionals, technologists, development agencies, manufacturers in the private sector, as well as the non-governmental agencies, from this region to work with the rural micro enterprise producers' groups.

14. We have a great challenge before us. The economic enhancement of the rural women in Asia and the Pacific must take top priority. I am convinced that all delegates participating in this workshop will share and exchange their expertise, experiences and information towards promoting economically viable micro enterprises that could be operated by women as individuals, families, groups or cooperatives.

It is my hope that all participants, local and foreign, will gain new insights and renewed commitment from this workshop through sharing of successful strategies to overcome these problems. Such successful strategies could then be replicated and modified to suit our individual needs and circumstances. Let us work together towards fulfilling this ultimate objective of improving the economic enhancement of our rural sisters.

15. With this, I have great pleasure in declaring open this Regional Workshop on Micro-Enterprises and Entrepreneur Development.
